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ABSTRACT

Despite their effect on attitude structure, actions that engender high commitment do not necessarily lead to attitude inference. The hypothesis that attitude inference follows behavior only when the individual is highly committed to the behavior, cannot avoid thinking about the attitudinal implications, and cannot reinterpret the behavior as attitudinally-irrelevant was tested with 50 female undergraduates. A 2 x 2 design (belief-relevant cue vs. belief-irrelevant cue x list issues for own topic vs. for confederate's topic) was used with a low commitment (belief-relevant cue, own topic) control condition. After agreeing to the request to tape record a consonant speech, subjects who overheard a confederate offer a belief-relevant reason for agreeing to tape record a speech on a different issue, produced more consonant arguments for their own topic and showed greater attitude polarization than did subjects in the control or the remaining three experimental conditions. Subjects in the belief-relevant-own-topic condition also generated the greatest number of consonant arguments, suggesting that attitude inference following one's own behavior may be mediated by the cognitive responses one generates. (Author/JAC)

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Inferring Attitudes from Behavior: Commitment, Attitudinal Implications, and Cognitive Responses

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Abstract

The hypothesis that attitude inference follows behavior that is not manded by the environment only when the individual is a) highly committed to the behavior, b) cannot avoid thinking about the attitudinal implications, and c) cannot reinterpret the behavior as attitudinally-irrelevant was tested with 50 female undergraduates in a 2 X 2 (belief-relevant cue vs. belief-irrelevant cue X list issues for own topic vs. for confederate's topic) design with a low-commitment (belief-relevant cue, own topic) control condition. After agreeing to the request to tape record a consonant speech, subjects who overheard a confederate offer a belief-relevant reason for agreeing to tape record a speech on a different issue, produced more consonant arguments for their own topic and showed greater attitude polarization than did subjects in the control or the remaining three experimental conditions. Subjects in the belief-relevant-own-topic condition also generated the greatest number of consonant arguments, suggesting that attitude inference following one's own behavior may be mediated by the cognitive responses one generates.

Inferring Attitudes from Behavior: Commitment, Attitudinal Implications, and Cognitive Responses

Several investigators have proposed that an individual's experience with an attitude object determines the nature of the attitude held (cf. Bem, 1971; Fazio & Zanna, 1981). For example, Bem (1967) argued that because internal cues are weak and/or ambiguous, we infer attitudes from our behavior whenever it is not "manded" by the environment. Nevertheless, research conducted by Kiesler and his colleagues (Kiesler, 1971; Kiesler, Roth, & Pallak, 1974) suggests that the process of inferring an attitude from behavior is not as straightfoward as Bem's analysis implies. Kiesler (1971) has proposed that the significance of behavior performed in the absence of external pressures is that it engenders considerable commitment. Individuals feel bound to actions performed under high volition, for minimal financial reward, and with which they are uniquely identified. One consequence is that attitudes related to such behavior become more resistant to attack (cf. Kiesler & Sakamura, 1966).

Despite their effect on attitude structure, actions that engender high commitment do not necessarily lead to attitude inference. In fact, Kiesler, Roth, and Pallak (1974) demonstrated that subjects who performed a consonant act entailing high commitment preferred either to avoid thinking about the attitudinal implications or to reinterpret the behavior as attitudinally irrelevant. Furthermore, Kiesler, Nisbett,

and Zanna (1969) reported that after agreeing to perform a consonant act entailing high commitment, subjects who overheard a confederate give a belief-irrelevant reason for agreeing to a similar request involving a different topic showed no attitude change. Presumably, the confederate's cue provided the subject with a way of reinterpreting her own behavior. In contrast, subjects who overheard the confederate give a belief-relevant reason adopted a more extreme attitude. Apparently, the confederate's cue made it difficult for the subject to deny or reinterpret the attitudinal implications of her behavior and as a result, attitude polarization occurred. This interpretation suggests that an attitude is inferred from behavior that engenders high commitment when a) the individual cannot avoid thinking about the attitudinal implications of the behavior, and b) the individual is unable to reinterpret the behavior as attitudinally irrelevant. The present experiment was designed to test this hypothesis.

Following the procedure employed by Kiesler, Nisbett, and Zanna (1969), each subject agreed to tape-record a consonant speech with which she would be publicly identified and then overheard a confederate state belief-irrelevant or belief-relevant reasons for agreeing to a similar request concerning a different topic. The opportunity to think about the attitudinal implications of her behavior was manipulated by instructing the subject to list issues relevant to her own or the confederate's topic. In addition to the four experimental conditions (belief-relevant cue vs. belief-irrelevant cue X own topic vs. confederate's topic), a

low-commitment (belief-relevant cue, own topic) control condition was included. If attitude inference occurs only when subjects are required to consider the attitudinal implications of their actions and the confederate's cue makes reinterpretation difficult, only subjects in the belief-relevant-cue-own-topic condition should show attitude polarization.

Method

Subjects and Selection of Issues

A total of 50 female undergraduates, who participated to earn extra credit in an introductory psychology course, were randomly assigned to conditions. Three weeks before the experiment, all subjects completed the pretest, a 31-item attitude questionnaire including the two issues employed, whether the federal government should institute wage and price controls (which was selected because none of the subjects indicated an opinion at the extremes or at the midpoint of the 61-point scale) and the proposal to establish an all-volunteer army (which was selected because all subjects expressed favorable opinions).

Procedure

Following Kiesler, Nisbett, and Zanna (1969), one of two male experimenters told the subject and the female confederate that they would be helping him to prepare materials for a future experiment investigating the relationship between the number of arguments and its persuasiveness by reading a prepared speech into the microphone of a tape recorder.

Commitment manipulation. To engender high commitment, subjects in the four experimental conditions were told to preface the recording with

personal identifying information, i.e., name, campus address, major, and year. To minimize commitment in the control condition, the subject was told not to identify herself and that her tape recording would be spliced with others to ensure her anonymity. The experimenter stated that topics were chosen randomly and that the subject would give a speech on mandatory wage and price controls (the position assigned was consonant with the subject's pretest attitude), and that the confederate would be speaking in favor of an all-volunteer army.

Manipulation of belief-relevance of behavior. After eliciting the subject's assent, the experimenter looked at the confederate who said, "I don't mind convincing people about something I believe in," (belief-relevant cue) or "I don't mind if it will help out with your study" (belief-irrelevant cue).

Manipulation of opportunity to think about the issue. The experimenter explained that he'd first tape record the confederate's topic and told the subject that while she was waiting she could help out by thinking of as many arguments as she could on the mandatory wage and price control issue (own topic) or on the all-volunteer army (confederate's topic).

In sum, subjects in the four experimental conditions received the high commitment manipulation, heard the confederate deliver either the belief-relevant cue or the belief-irrelevant cue, and were asked to list arguments either on their own topic or on the confederate's topic. Subjects in the control condition received the low commitment manipulation, heard

the belief-relevant cue, and were asked to list arguments on their own topic.

Dependent Measures

Each subject complied with the instructions to list consonant arguments. The number of arguments generated by each subject was calculated so that the influence of self-generated arguments on the final attitude position could be assessed. This measure was included to determine whether cognitive responses, which have been demonstrated to mediate attitude change in response to persuasive appeals (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), similarly mediate attitude inference from one's own behavior.

When the experimenter returned he explained that he was having difficulty with the tape recorder and that to save time he would like the subject to complete materials usually completed after the tape recording. One questionnaire requested opinions on five topics, including the two topics employed. The second, allegedly a departmental questionnaire, consisted of four questions designed to assess the subject's motivation to do well on the tape recording and was identical to that employed by Kiesler, Nisbett, and Zanna (1969), whose rationale was used to introduce the two questionnaires to the subject. After completing the questionnaires, the subject was thoroughly debriefed, sworn to secrecy, and excused.

Results

Analysis of the pretest opinions revealed no significant effects for either issue employed. In addition, no significant effects were

obtained for the analysis of the final opinion concerning the confederate's issue.

Consistent with Kiesler, Nisbett, and Zanna (1969), analysis of the responses to the "departmental questionnaire" revealed that subjects who overheard a belief-relevant cue expected to expend more effort on the tape recording than those who overheard a belief-irrelevant cue, $F(1, 36) = 5.56$, $p < .02$, M's = 36.84 and 28.82, respectively. The main effect failed to reach significance for the three remaining items (anticipated evaluation of performance, willingness to volunteer again, enjoyment).

To calculate the degree of attitude polarization, the difference between each subject's score on the pretest and on the final questionnaire was calculated and assigned a positive value if the final opinion was more extreme than the initial opinion and a negative value if the final opinion was more moderate. Since polarization scores were highly skewed, a square-root transformation (Winer, 1971) was performed prior to analyses. The 2 X 2 analysis of variance performed on the experimental cells revealed a cue X topic interaction, $F(1, 36) = 4.02$, $p < .053$, and a topic main effect, $F(1, 36) = 4.40$, $p < .05$ (See Table 1). Consistent with prediction, attitude polarization occurred only in the relevant-cue-own-topic condition, the condition in which subjects were unable either to avoid thinking about the issue or to reinterpret the commitment as attitudinally irrelevant. Means in the remaining three experimental conditions did not differ (both t's < 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

While the form of the obtained interaction was consistent with prediction, the particular means obtained in three of the conditions were unexpected. As can be seen in Table 1, while positive attitude change occurred in the relevant-cue-own-topic condition, negative change occured in the remaining three conditions. Furthermore, when the three own-topic conditions were analyzed separately, a significant effect was obtained, $F(1, 27) = 5.24$, $p < .02$, primarily due to the difference in the two experimental means, $t(27) = 2.72$, $p < .01$. But neither the mean for the relevant-cue condition nor the mean for the irrelevant-cue condition differed significantly from that obtained in the control condition, $t(27) = 1.53$, $p < .20$, and $t(27) = 1.19$, $p < .25$, respectively. Thus, the interaction obtained in the four experimental conditions may have been the result both of attitude polarization in the relevant-cue-own-topic condition and attitude moderation in the remaining three conditions.

Analysis of the number of arguments generated by subjects in the experimental conditions revealed a marginally significant interaction, $F(1, 36) = 3.03$, $p < .09$. When instructed to consider a different topic, subjects generated approximately the same number of consonant arguments, regardless of the confederate's cue (average $M = 2.25$). In contrast, when instructed to consider their own topic, subjects who had heard the belief-relevant cue tended to generate more consonant arguments ($M = 2.56$) than subjects who had heard the belief-irrelevant cue ($M = 1.80$), $t(36) = 1.52$, $p < .15$. Although the analysis of the three own-topic conditions failed to reveal a signficant effect, the pattern of means was similar to

that obtained for attitude polarization (M = 2.10, for the low-commitment control condition). Thus, whether attitude polarization occurs following consonant behavior may depend on whether the individual is induced to generate more arguments.

Discussion

The results obtained are consistent with previous commitment research. Undertaking an action that engenders high commitment does not automatically lead to attitude inference, The present results demonstrate that such actions lead to attitude polarization only when a) it is difficult to reinterpret the attitudinal implications of the action and b) it is difficult to avoid thinking about the attitudinal implications.

Analysis of the number of consonant arguments generated suggested that attitude polarization occurs because these conditions stimulate individuals to generate arguments supporting the attitude. In their analysis of persuasion, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) have stressed the mediating role played by the arguments an individual generates while listening to a persuasive communication. According to their analysis, when a persuasive communication is actively processed in this way, the resulting attitude change is more enduring. The present results suggest that their analysis also may describe the process underlying attitude inference from one's own behavior, Specifically, attitude polarization may occur whenever one's own behavior leads one to generate arguments supporting the attitude.

One question raised by the present results is whether the cognitive response analysis can account for the attitude moderation obtained. Specifically, does attitude moderation occur whenever the thoughts generated

by one's behavior are predominately negative? The Kiesler, Roth and Pallak (1974) results suggest that this may occur when an individual is able to reinterpret or avoid thinking about actions that engender commitment. Since a measure of attitude-discrepant thoughts was not included in the present study, this interpretation awaits further research. In any case, the present results demonstrate the value of combining two quite different theoretical approaches, the cognitive response model and commitment theory, to address the question of how and when individuals infer attitudes from their behavior.

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Footnote

Portions of this research were presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, August, 1982, in Washington, D.C. Requests for reprints should be sent to Suzanne R. Pallak, Department of Psychology, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 20057.

Table 1

Degree of Attitude Polarization as a Function of Confederate's Cue and Topic for which Subject Listed Issues

	Topic for which Subject Instructed to List Issues	
	Own Topic	Confederate's Topic
Confederate's Cue		
Belief-Relevant	1.62	-2.22
Belief-Irrelevant	-1.98	-2.07
Low Commitment Control (Belief-Relevant Cue)	- .40	

Note. Means obtained following square-root transformation of attitude polarization scores. N = 10 per condition.